

Through the Haze: Policy Protects Employees from Secondhand Smoke Exposure

Issue

The U.S. Surgeon General stated in the 2006 report *The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke* that “there is no risk-free level of exposure to secondhand smoke.” He also found that millions of Americans are still exposed to secondhand smoke in their workplaces and home. Tobacco use is the leading preventable cause of death and illness in South Carolina, and up to 1,120 adults each year die because of secondhand smoke exposure, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Fortunately, S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control’s (DHEC) Mills/Jarrett campus health employees do not have to choose between health and livelihood to gain access to the work place each day. DHEC’s mission is to help promote and ensure communities become healthier places to live and work, and this standard also applies to our own work site.

Intervention

To combat the alarming tobacco-related health problems South Carolina is facing and protect our own workforce, the Mills/Jarrett Complex, which is the statewide headquarters for Health Services at DHEC, became tobacco-free campus beginning Sept. 2, 2008. The policy prohibits smoking and tobacco use on campus grounds including parking lots, sidewalks, and breezeways.

The Division of Tobacco Prevention and Control at DHEC helped lead implementation of the tobacco-free campus policy. The Division is supported by the Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant, and the state secondhand smoke policy prevention coordinator works as a Block Grant consultant to the agency’s public health regions

Specific implementation tactics included:

- Drafting communications to employees, contractors and neighboring businesses about the policy change;
- Creating and using a toolkit to help managers successfully communicate the policy;
- Facilitating communications with security to ensure the policy would be properly enforced;
- Designing and facilitating the production of promotional materials announcing the policy; and
- Making sure that cessation resources were available to employees and visitors who wanted to quit tobacco use.

Impact

Thanks to the above efforts, DHEC’s Health Services headquarters is now a tobacco-free campus eliminating secondhand smoke exposure for 300 employees plus hundreds of visitors and clients.

Other impacts include:

- 120 DHEC sites have adopted smoke-free building policies and 50-foot entrance restrictions for all main entrances;
- Five public health regions are working towards completely smoke-free campus policies ensuring that thousands of clients will be protected further from secondhand smoke while entering and exiting buildings; and
- DHEC as the leading health authority in the state has set a powerful example for tobacco-free policy at worksites, hopefully impacting other organizations, businesses and communities to do the same.

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